

The City Woman

by Tess Redding

Megan lit another cigarette and finished setting the table. She had been late getting back from church, and Mrs. Oakey would be there any minute. Megan didn't want to be unprepared.

She had stretched her librarian's salary to the limit and planned an expensive luncheon, even though she knew it wouldn't take much to impress anyone from this backwater Tennessee town she had been living in for eight months. Seafood salad, cheese souffle, fresh croissants. "Can this woman be bought?" Megan wondered as she refolded the napkins. Would she marry Taylor if his mother continued to hate her? Would Taylor marry her? "He's sweet and loving," Megan thought, "but he can't stand up to his mother. It's going to be up to me."

The doorbell rang. Megan snuffed out her cigarette and went to greet her guest. She put on her brightest smile and opened the door wide. Mrs. Oakey, a small stiff woman, clutched her large white vinyl handbag, and did not smile back. She looked around the apartment slowly, raising and lowering her eyes and turning her head as if she were an official inspector making a formal assessment. Mrs. Oakey stiffened even more when she saw the two large bookcases overflowing with literature.

"I'm glad you came," Megan said. "Please have a seat." She pointed to the sofa.

"Thank you. I'll sit here." Mrs. Oakey perched herself on the edge of the green wingback chair and held her purse tightly in her lap.

"May I get you something to drink before lunch?"

"I don't drink. None of the Oakeys do." She stared at Megan. "I know that you do though. Don't let me stop you." Her eyes accused.

"Mrs. Oakey, I only drink beer with pizza. I don't think that makes me much of a drinker. Besides, I didn't mean anything alcoholic. I meant iced tea or a soft drink."

"No thank you," was the stern reply.

"Then shall we have lunch?" Megan went to the dining table and pulled out a chair. "Please sit here." Still clutching her purse, Mrs. Oakey moved to the table and sat silently.

"I hope you like what I've prepared. There's shrimp and crabmeat...."

"Where's your kids?" Mrs. Oakey interrupted.

"They're playing next door. I thought we needed to be alone to talk."

"No need to talk much. I know what you want." She paused and looked Megan in the eye. "You want Taylor. You want a man with money in the bank to help you raise your two kids."

"Mrs. Oakey," Megan protested, "money has nothing to do with it. Taylor and I love each other. You've known that for four months."

"He don't know you. You're a city woman. He's not used to women like you, women who already been married and has kids, women who drink and smoke." Megan saw Mrs. Oakey nod toward the dirty ashtray on the sideboard as if she were presenting evidence to a jury.

"I do not understand your objections, Mrs. Oakey. Isn't it important that Taylor and I love each other?"

"He don't know you, and you don't know our ways."

"I have been living in this town long enough to know your ways pretty well. And as for Taylor, we have been together almost every day for six months, and I think I know him as well as anyone. He is open and honest and sensitive. He has let me read his poems and short stories, and he said that soon I could help him write his novel. He has shared his most private thoughts with me."

"That's wrong, can't you see? You encourage him to do that wasteful writin'. It took his daddy a long time to talk him into takin' a job at the factory and now you're confusin' his mind."

"Writing is not wasteful and Taylor has a gift for it."

"You city woman, what do you know about this town, about our lives? You can't make no livin' writin'."

"Maybe not here, but in other places...." The doorbell rang. Megan was grateful.

It was Taylor, his tall, thin frame leaning against the doorjamb, as he wrote in his small, leather-bound notebook. "Hi, honey," he said, sliding his pen into his shirt pocket.

"You're early. We haven't even eaten yet." Megan stepped into the hall outside her apartment and lit a cigarette.

"How's Mama? She all right?"

"She's fine, but, Taylor, she's never going to like me. She doesn't like anything about me and she thinks I'm using you."

"Now, Megan honey, I've told you before that you'll have to be patient with Mama. She means well. I'm sure she'll come around eventually."

Megan looked at him. Her voice came slowly and deliberately. "How long are you willing to wait?"

"You know I can't hurt Mama."

"But you can hurt me?"

"Now honey, nobody has to be hurt. Just give Mama some time."

There was silence between them. Avoiding her eyes, Taylor shifted nervously. Megan waited for a response. Finally there was a sigh of resignation and Taylor walked past her into the apartment.

"Come on, Mama, let's go home. It's time."

Mrs. Oakey paused as she passed Megan. "I'm keepin' my boy at home where he belongs," she said triumphantly.

"You go on, Mama. I'll be there in a minute." Taylor turned to Megan but she had already gone onto the apartment and closed the door.

He leaned against the doorjamb and took out his little, leather-bound notebook. In it he wrote, "Research on city woman ended. For novel, change name to Morgan."